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ABSTRACT

To investigate the influence of group settings on the receiver's perception of an inducement to rhetorical transactions, 45 undergraduates in a basic speech communication course were asked to rank from most important to least important a group of items that might help survivors of an arctic plane crash. After completing individual rankings, subjects participated in small group discussions and created group scores for the items. They then identified the three items showing the greatest incremental differences between their personal and group scores. Subjects' responses were grouped into four general clusters: those listing justifications for changed opinions, those comparing competing arguments, those citing sources as support, and those indicating the group process as an explicit factor in changed ranking. Tentative generalizations from these responses included the following: (1) group rhetoric is inherently related to the consensual development of the group; (2) rhetorical ideas develop from comparisons, which are themselves facilitated by the small group setting; (3) rhetorical transactions are a function of leadership; (4) the construction of an argument in a small group setting is an interactive, social phenomenon; and (5) consensus is frequently a matter of compromise and cooperation rather than agreement. (MM)

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GROUP DISCUSSION AS A RHETORICAL PROCESS: THE INFLUENCE OF THE SMALL GROUP SETTING ON THE PROCESS OF ACCEDENCE

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GROUP DISCUSSION AS A RHETORICAL PROCESS:
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In 1970, The Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism recommended that rhetorical critics broaden their perspective to include several nonpublic settings. Specifically, they recommended that critics investigate conversations, group discussions, sloganeering, singing, marching, and gesturing.[1] Since that time, several rhetorical critics and small group scholars have examined rhetorical transactions in group discussions.[2] Many of these studies have focused on the strategic, rhetorical choices of group members or on the structure of their arguments. For example, Canary, Ratledge, and Siebold examined the structure and sequence of group arguments.[3] Similarly, Hirokawa identified rhetorical strategies used by group members and classified the types of arguments they employed.[4] Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough explicated the rhetorical characteristics of different phases within consciousness raising groups.[5] Johnson examined the rhetoric of groups who believed they were in conflict with other groups.[6] Donaldson investigated the role of advocacy in small group discussions.[7] And Alderton examined the personality of group member's and subsequent arguments they produced in the process of group polarization.[8]

While each of these studies has contributed to our understanding of rhetorical transactions in group discussion, each has left one important area largely unexplored. Few of the recent research efforts in rhetoric of small group discussion have focused on the effects of rhetorical appeals on group members indivudally or on the group as a whole. We know very little about the influence of the small group settings on the process

of accedence or closure. The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of institutional influences of the small group setting on effective rhetorical appeals in group discussion.

This study attempts to incorporate into analysis, two contemporary notions concerning the nature of rhetoric. First, rhetoric is influenced by the physical/psychological/social settings in which it occurs. While rhetoricians of all ages have recognized the importance of the occasion, contemporary scholars have placed greater emphasis on the setting through situational perspectives of rhetoric. Bitzer defines a rhetorical situation as a "context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance."[9] Wilson and Arnold add, "A rhetorical situation is made up of people, conditions, physical features, and human relations within which there exists some need."[10]

Situational definitions of rhetoric emphasize the influence of the setting on rhetorical transactions. Bitzer writes, "Situational rhetoric thus commences not with attention to speaker intention and artistry, not with focus on language resources, the argumentation process, or natural psychological processes; rather it commences with the critical relation between persons and environment and the process of interaction leading to harmonious adjustment."[11] Eugene White urges critics to ask, "To what extent do the logical-psychological impingements of time, place, sponsorship of the meeting, and so on, constrain the modification potential of the rhetorical urgency?"[12]

Second, contemporary critics have begun to recognize the importance of audience or receiver centered analysis. While the majority of scholars continue to concentrate on source or message, some critics are emphasizing

the role of the audience in rhetorical communication. Samual Becker writes, "Our traditional concept of the message has severly limited usefulness for understanding contemporary communication. The emphasis of rhetorical studies should probably remain upon the message, but we must define messages in a more fruitful way, in a way that is more descriptive of what man as receiver is exposed to, rather than what man as source creates."[13] White adds, "The unfolding of the rhetorical act involves, of course, a cyclical interrelationship between the speaker and listener that lasts as long as the act itself."[14]

This study was designed to explore the influence of group settings on the receivers perception of an inducement to rhetorical transactions.

Procedures

This study examined 112 responses from forty-five individuals who engaged in problem solving discussion in ten different groups.

The group members were all students at a large eastern university and all were enrolled in a basic course of speech communication. Before the discussions began, each of the members were asked to solve the problem individually. The problem was a hypothetical case involving a plane crash in the artic. Members were asked to assume that they were one of the survivors from the crash. They were presented with a description of the problem including the nature of the area in which they had crashed, the time of year, and a list of fifteen items that were salvaged from the wreckage. The members were then asked to rank order the items based on the "importance" for survival. The most important item would receive a ranking of "1" and the least important item would receive a ranking of "15."

Each of the members was given twenty minutes to complete the individual ranking.

Next, the subjects engaged in a problem solving discussion with four other members. The subjects membership in their group had been established six weeks earlier as part of a regular class assignment. The groups had performed several tasks prior to their discussion and continued on different assignments for two or three weeks after the experiment.

Motivation to perform the task was provided by two incentives. First, the experiment was one part of an assignment which counted as 10% of the student's final grade. In addition, a competitive atmosphere was encouraged. Members were told that a "correct" answer, based on survival experts rankings, would be revealed at the end of the discussion. They were told that their group scores would be posted and that winners would be announced.

The groups were asked to perform the same task as the individual members had just completed. The groups were advised that their rankings of the items were to reflect a consensus of all group members. They were given thirty minutes to complete the task.

After the group discussion, members were asked to compare their individual rankings with those of the group. Subjects were to identify the incremental change of each item. This was accomplished by taking the absolute value of the difference of the individual ranking and of the group ranking. For example, if the compass had an individual ranking of "10" and group ranking of "2," the incremental change would be "8."

Next, the members identified the three items with the largest incremental change. They were asked the question, "Why did you change your mind?" The members were urged to answer the questions for each of

the three items in as much detail as possible.

The members were then debriefed concerning the purpose of the study and provided with the experts rankings. Scores were posted and winners announced.

Analysis of the Data

The above procedures produced 112 usable responses. Some members only listed two items and several of the responses were unintelligible. In certain instances, brief follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify ambiguous or vague responses.

The analysis was accomplished in two stages. The first stage was the initial sort. Based on a procedure articulated by Rawlins,[15] the responses were sorted into piles which represented similarity of content. This was accomplished by the following steps. First, the researcher read each of the responses several times to gain familiarity with their content. Second, the responses were sorted and resorted according to similarity of content. The subsequent piles were continually changing as similarities were divided and refined. Finally, the piles were grouped together in clusters in an "attempt to decipher implicit informal logics that could account for the relationship among the seemingly opposed as well as connected categories."[16]

The second stage of analysis determined the strength of the groupings or clusters. This was determined by counting the number of responses in each cluster and calculating a percentage of the total responses involved. Since the clusters were never assumed to be mutually exlcusive, all 112 responses were resorted against each of the main clusters. The strength

of each cluster was then recalculated. While some statistical analyses were performed, they were descriptive in nature and all inferences were based on the critical judgments of the researcher.

Results

The initial stage of analysis produced twenty piles which were grouped by similar content. While many other groupings were identified, only twenty of the groupings showed significant strength to warrant attention. The twenty groupings are listed in Table One.

The twenty groupings were combined into four general clusters. They were: 1) Responses which listed some reason, either fact, opinion, or inference, which the members believed to be good justification for changing his/her opinion; 2) Responses which cited two, or more, competing arguments or appeals and the reasons why one was chosen over the other; 3) Responses which cited a source as important in the process of accedence; and 4) Responses which cited the group process as an explicit factor in changing the member's conviction.

The strongest cluster was the "good reasons" grouping. The vast majority of group members were able to recite very specific arguments to explain their change of mind. (See Table One.) Many of the responses listed dialogue that the group had engaged in and the "reasons" which emerged. Others simply listed opinions, facts, or inferences which they claimed were the basis of decisions. For example, one member wrote,

> Michelle pointed out it [syrup] was the only source of nourishment and energy, especially since we were unsure about possibility of trapping animals.

Another member wrote,

> It [alarm clock] could be used to keep the group awake thereby preventing hypothermia.

Some interesting sub-groupings were identified within the first cluster. Many of the reasons which the members cited had been filtered through criteria which the group had established. The value or "goodness" of a reason became associated with "warmth," "survival," "rescue," or "mobility."

> My group felt that the mirror was of great value in signaling planes which I was unaware of ...

Similarly, many individuals used their own criteria for evaluating the goodness of a reason.

> I argued the value of the razor and also the value of the mirror for signaling. As was pointed out by the entire group, the weather was quite poor, therefore the mirror would be useless.

> It was not too hard to convince me of their [water purification tablets] relative unimportance because I knew everyone would say "there is plenty of fresh water around."

And finally, many of the responses reflected the emergent nature of the discussion. Many of the decisions made were either the direct result or indirect result of previous decisions.

> I thought this [handbook on navigation] would provide the best source of info since no one in the group was an expert, but everyone also said it was worthless because we had decided to stay put and concentrate on survival and a rescue crew.

The second cluster involved responses which reported two competing or conflicting arguments or reasons. Usually the response also indicated why one argument was chosen over another. Frequently, the members

compared their own prediscussion reasons with those advanced by other members in the group.

> Hand Axe--I figured we would gather twigs, etc. not needing to chop wood for fires. They said we needed it to chop wood to build a tent with the canvas.
>
> I though with the clothing we already had on plus the canvas for shelter, the sleeping bags weren't necessary. Mike informed me that with the wind-chill factor and temp that these still weren't enough.

The third cluster revealed specific sources for rhetorical appeals. Many of the responses cited one or more group members as a source for an argument.

> I found less value in the book, the inner tube and shaving kit. But Chris said we could use the inner tube and shaving kit for rescue purposes, by burning tube and reflecting the mirror. And Mark pointed out that we could always burn the book.

Often, one member was listed by others of the same group as the source for a variety of arguments for different items. Conversely, some responses, for the same group, listed different sources for the same item changes. Also, two or three sources were often listed in tandom or together as one rhetorical force.

> Canvas--Carsten suggested that if the sleeping bags were mummy bags they would be adequate for wind protection. I still consider it high on the list since it could protect from wind in staring fires. Jeff suggested that it would be extremely heavy for transport. This is very true.

The final cluster involved factors of the group setting which were specifically listed as factors in the decision process. It appeared that the setting itself had rhetorical implications. Many of the responses

listed the group as the source for arguments.

> The other group members felt keeping warm for survival more important than moving out right away. They convinced me that survival was first priority over adventuring out on snowshoes.

Finally, the group pressure to conform to the ideas or suggestions of the majority, played a significant role in the member's decision making. Many of the responses indicated that members felt out-voted or pressured to "give in" to the will of the group.

> My initial idea that the clock could be used to tell when the sun would be setting make it higher on the list, but the group thought it not so important. I still think it important since cloud cover limits the group's ability to see sun and tell time left before dark.

> The group together had many more uses for the canvas than I did individually.

> Wood matches--Just went along with the group.

Discussion

The proceding analysis and results produced some tentative generalizations concerning the group setting and rhetorical transactions. First, group rhetoric is inherently related to the consensual development of the group. Scheidel and Crowell have indicated that groups return to certain consensual decisions in the progressive modification of ideas. "But in group problem solving, at the same time that the group is moving toward a solution, it is following a circular course which we have interpreted as serving the purpose of continuously anchoring the developing group consensus."[17]

Similarly, rhetorical transactions are anchored in group consensus. For instance, the use of good reasons to convince other members, often emerges from previous discussion. The goodness of a reason evolves from earlier decisions or similar precidents. While traditional rhetorical scholars struggle over what constitutes a good reason, the small groups scholar can turn to the developing consensus and evolution of ideas within a discussion as one answer.

Second, rhetorical decisions appear to be a matter of comparison. Scholars have long recognized that decision making is inherently rhetorical. Wilson and Arnold write, "How do decisions come about? We draw upon all the knowledge we have with respect to the issue we must decide. We weigh the choices we could make according to our knowledge. Finally, we choose a course of action. . . Either before we make the final decision, or after making it, or sometimes at both points, we build a case that will justify out final choice."[18]

This comparison of arguments happens in most rhetorical settings. But the small group setting appears to facilitate the articulation of such comparisons. In the small group setting, dialogue is almost inevitable.

Third, rhetorical transactions can be seen as a function of leadership. While much has been written concerning task and socio-emotional leadership, little attention has been directed to rhetorical leadership. The results of this study, indicate that rhetorical leadership is functional. The function can be assumed by one person, a combination of two or more members, or by the entire group.

Fourth, members can join together in rhetorical coalitions. Members perceive arguments as originating from two or more advocates. Unlike

many public forums, the group setting allows the construction of an argument to be an interactive, social phenomenon. In Brockredian terms,[19] the group setting allows argument$_1$ to be the product of two or more individuals.

Finally, many group members changed their ranking but remained unconvinced. Consensus in some instances, appeared to be a matter of compromise and cooperation rather than agreement. The pressure to conform produced many decisions, but in some instances failed to persuade.

This exploratory study into the nature of the group setting and its influence on rhetorical appeals was intended to be a beginning. Much further research is needed. Such studies would not only benefit small group scholarship, but also rhetorical criticism in general. It may be the case, that while we have much to learn from traditional rhetorical studies, we also have something to offer in return.

Grouping of Related Content and
Informal Logic(s) of Main Clusters

		#	%
I.	Responses citing good reasons as the basis of decision	91	80
	a. offered own opinion		
	b. offered group opinion		
	c. offered facts		
	d. repeated group offered facts		
	e. reasons filtered through group criteria		
	f. reasons filtered through individual criteria		
	g. reasons based on previous decisions.		
II.	Responses comparing two or more arguments	55	49
	h. comparing prediscussion attitudes with group discussion		
	i. comparing two arguments of other group members		
	j. justification of the argument chosen.		
III.	Responses citing a source	45	40
	k. specific member as the source		
	l. two or more members cited with source		
	m. one source on different responses		
	n. different source for same items as different responses		
	o. rhetorical coalitions.		
IV.	Responses citing the group setting	59	53
	p. whole group as source argument		
	q. compromised for the sake of the group		
	r. cooperated for the sake of the group		
	s. out-voted (unconcerned)		
	t. time limitation forced a decision.		

End Notes

[1]Thomas J. Sloan, Richard B. Gregg, Thomas R, Nilsen, Irving S. Rein, Herbert W. Simons, Herman G. Stelzner, and Donald W. Zucharias, "Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 225.

[2]See for example, Daniel S. Canary, Nancy T. Ratledge, and David R. Seibold, "Argument and Group Decision-Making: Development of a Coding Scheme," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the SCA, November 4-7, 1982, Louisville, Kentucky. Randy Hirokawa, "Group Discussion as a Rhetorical Process: The Structure and Function of Argument in Group Decision-Making," Paper presented at the Conference on Research in Small Group Communication, The Pennsylvania State University, April 27-30, 1982, University Park, PA. James W. Chesebro, John F. Cragan, and Patricia McCullough, "The Small Group Technique of the Radical Revolutionary: A Synthetic Study of Consciousness Raising," Speech Monographs 40 (1973), 136-196. Bonnie M. Johnson, "Images of the Enemy in Intergroup Conflict," Central States Speech Journal 26 (1975), 84-92. Alice Donaldson, "The Role of Advocacy in Small Group Discussion," in Dimension of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation, eds. George Ziegelmueller and Jack Rhodes (Annendale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1981), pp. 790-798. Steven M. Alderton, "Locus of Control Based Arguments as a Predictor of Group Polarization," Communication Quarterly, 30 (1982), 381-387. Barbara F. Sharf, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Leadership Emergence in Small Groups," Communication Monographs 45 (1978), 156-172. Barbara F. Sharf, "Rhetorical Analysis of Nonpublic Discourse," Communication Quarterly, 27 (1979), 21-30.

[3]Canary, Ratledge, and Seibold, "Argument and Group Decision-Making."

[4]Hirokawa, "Group Discussion as a Rhetorical Process."

[5]Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough, "The Small Group Technique of the Radical Revolutionary."

[6]Johnson, "Images of the Enemy."

[7]Donalson, "The Role of Advocacy in Small Group Discussion."

[8]Alderton, "Locus of Control-Based Arguments,"

[9]Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968), 5.

[10]John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, Public Speaking as a Liberal Art, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978), p. 15.

[11]Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Functional Communication: A situational Perspective," in Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. 25.

[12]Eugene E. White, "Rhetorical Historical Configuration," in Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1980), p. 16.

[13]Samuel L. Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," in The Prospect of Rhetoric," ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 31.

[14]White, p. 16.

[15]William K. Rawlins, "Openness as Problematic in Ongoing Friendships: Two Conversational Dilemmas," Communication Monographs, 50 (1983), p. 1-13.

[16]Rawlins, p. 4.

[17]Thomas M. Scheidel and Laura Crowell, "Idea Development in Small Discussion Groups," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 50 (1964), 145.

[18]Wilson & Arnold, p. 6.

[19]Wayne Brockriede, "Characteristics of Arguments and Arguing," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 13 (1977), 124-132.